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Israel Helped Disguise Iran Raid Signals

There was a moment of high danger last April as American commandos, huddled in helicopters, rattled toward Iran. Hundreds of miles away, Israeli intelligence specialists were routinely monitoring radio communications. They picked up some suspicious transmissions and easily detected the hostage rescue operation.

Acting quickly, they began sending out confusing signals to disguise the telltale U.S. transmissions. Incredibly, the Americans had overlooked this elementary precaution. But fortunately, the Israelis covered for them, or the ill-fated mission might have fared even worse.

This has been reported by a Pentagon evaluation team in their secret findings. The report speculates that the Soviets, their surveillance capabilities unmatched, must have detected the signals. But thanks to the Israelis, the Soviets may not have interpreted them correctly.

The Pentagon planners also seemed not to anticipate that anything would go wrong during the rescue attempt, though it was a mission of mind-numbing complexity and split-second timing. So when the unexpected happened, as another top-secret report to Sen. John Tower (R-Tex.) makes clear, the commanders of the operation had no pre-planned responses ready.

Worse yet, there was such poor overall coordination that unit commanders made individual, sometimes contradictory, decisions. And when the officers on the scene sought guidance from the Pentagon on handling the unexpected developments, the top brass in Washington passed the buck right back to them.

"[It is] clear that there was very little

planning for unexpected contingencies," the report to Tower states. "What do you do if you hit bad weather? What do you do if there is an emergency involving fire? What do you do if Iranians intervene? What do you do if you get down to five aircraft at Desert Site One? What do you do if some Iranians who observe the mission escape?"

All of these accidents — and more — happened. Yet no coordinated responses had been planned. Adding to the potential for confusion, the Senate report contends, was the fact that each unit commander — in charge of helicopters, transport planes and ground troops — "felt responsible for his part of the action and operated in isolation except when the force was married up for rehearsals."

The report explains: "Historically, it has been unwise to so fragment command. In this case, no one at Desert Site [One] was responsible for making decisions. The man who was, was in the White House, thousands of miles from the scene of the action."

The weather over the Iranian desert — the unusual "suspended dust" phenomenon — and the reactions to it illustrate the weaknesses in the rescue mission command setup.

The lead C130 transport was the first aircraft to hit the suspended dust fog, but though the planes were engulfed in it for 45 minutes, the commander "elected not to report" the unusual condition. When the Marine helicopters hit the dust, the flight leader landed briefly and reported to the Pentagon.

He was "not provided any guidance," the report notes. "The [Pentagon] asked, 'What are you going to do?' Since the other aircraft had not turned

back, the flight leader decided to go on." It was a hairy experience, flying blind, but six Marine choppers made it to Desert Site One.

There was similar lack of coordination in the matter of radio silence and radar avoidance. The Marine copter pilots were "very worried about going too high to get out of the weather, out of fear of being 'painted' by Iranian radar and thus compromising the mission," the report notes. But the "Air Force was much more relaxed, and flew all the way at a higher altitude."

Likewise, the Marines maintained strict radio silence, even in the extreme danger of the dust fog. But when the first C130 landed, the impact broke its non-interceptible radio. The Air Force pilot then "went ahead to report his arrival on an open net[work], thus possibly compromising the mission, even though another secure radio was available at the site," the report states.

Spoiling the Spoils — Win or lose in November, Jimmy Carter appears determined to leave his mark on the upper echelons of Washington bureaucracy — and leave few political spoils for a victorious Ronald Reagan.

A flood of presidential appointments to vacancies on various regulatory and advisory commissions has issued from the White House in recent months. If the Senate OKs them all, the agencies will be loaded with Carter people for years to come. Some figures: In May of 1980 Carter submitted 217 nominations, compared to just 42 in May of 1979; in June and July, he sent 379 nominations, compared to 220 in that period last year.

The president is also "piggybacking" many longterm nominations on short-term appointments to fill unexpired terms.